

U.N. talks stall over slavery, Middle East

Delegates meet through night to resolve key issues

DURBAN, South Africa (AP-Special) — A United Nations conference on racism has been extended as delegates try to resolve disagreements over the Middle East situation and demands that the West apologize for slavery.

The conference was scheduled to end yesterday, but closed-door negotiations continued into early this morning before breaking off for a few hours. Officials said informal talks would continue through the night and the formal sessions were expected to resume today.

While delegates struggled over how to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and African demands for some kind of compensation for slavery, European negotiators agreed yesterday to a carefully crafted statement that they termed an apology for slavery, a move aimed at fending off lawsuits seeking reparations.

"The concrete results of this conference are essential to the fight against racism around the world," said Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel, who is leading the European Union negotiators at the conference.

Canada still has a delegation at the meeting despite voicing strong reservations earlier in the week about proposed wording in the final communiqué.

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien said Canada would hang in as long as there remained the possibility of compromise. "When you're not there, you know, you cannot help the situation," he said.

At various times yesterday, contradictory reports circulated of breakthroughs and breakdowns in private talks on the two contentious issues of the Middle East and slavery. But late last night, conference officials said neither had been resolved.

"We still have some hours to find a solution, but I am not Mr. Miracle," Michel said. "There is a still a chance

to make a success, but it will be very difficult."

Some progress on the Middle East issue was made Thursday when South Africa, the host country, proposed a new final statement on the topic that was devoid of the inflammatory anti-Israeli language that prompted the United States and Israel to quit the conference Monday.

But yesterday, there were reports that Arab states had hardened their position by insisting on restoring some of the harshly critical language.

On the issue of apologies and reparations for slavery, there were also reports of a breakthrough compromise between European and African countries. The proposed wording expressed "profound regret" for slavery and the colonial slave trade but stopped short of the explicit apology demanded by Africa.

Later in the day, however, there were indications the compromise had been rejected. African states also have asked for Europe to recognize past slavery as a "crime against humanity" and to pledge financial reparations for victims' descendants or countries. European states have rejected both ideas.

Some observers said that despite the distracting dominance of two issues here, the conference has made significant strides in dealing with numerous other matters such as migrants' rights and has offered a first international forum for such minority groups as Indian untouchables and European Roma, or gypsies.

"This meeting has been about so much more than the Middle East," said Reed Brody of the Human Rights Watch. He said it had put the plight of lesser-known victims of racism "squarely on the international agenda."

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